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SUBJECT: NEPALIS LAUNCH PRIVATE EFFORT TO SOLVE BHUTANESE
REFUGEE CRISIS

1. Summary: A team of distinguished Nepali former diplomats and former officials met with Ambassador Malinowski on January 17 to encourage US support for efforts to repatriate Bhutanese refugees residing in seven camps in Eastern Nepal. The delegation recently returned from a trip to New Delhi, where they held similar meetings with the Ambassadors of Bhutan's donor countries, hoping to encourage international involvement. Concerned that a failure to resolve the crisis could result in radicalization of the refugee population and aggravated regional instability, the group called for increased pressure on the governments of Nepal and Bhutan, and requested US assistance in convincing India to take a more active role in the process of resolution. End summary.

2. In a January 17 meeting with Ambassador, representatives of the Bhutanese Refugee Repatriation Support Group, Nepal (BRRSG) encouraged US support for increasing pressure on Bhutan to resolve the protracted refugee crisis that has confined 100,000 Bhutanese to UNHCR-administered camps in Nepal for thirteen years. Citing a lack of employment opportunities and a lack of facilities for higher education as the causes, the five-member delegation reported increasing frustration and anger among the youth of the refugee community--some of whom have lived their entire lives in the camps. The group warned that the lack of progress toward a solution "may cause problems" not just for Nepal and Bhutan, but for India and other neighboring countries, and called on the USG to help convince the Indian government to take a more active role in settling the issue.

3. Boasting an impressive membership of distinguished Nepali, including former Foreign Minister Shailendra Kumar Upadhyaya, former Foreign Secretary and former Ambassador to the European Union Kedra Bhakta Shrestha, former Foreign Secretary and former Secretary General of SAARC Yadav Kant

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Silwal, and former Ambassador to the United Nations Dr. Jay Raj Acharya, the BRRSG's stated goal is "to repatriate all Bhutanese refugees to Bhutan with full dignity, safety and honor." The group intends to "mobilize national and international public opinion to solve the Bhutanese refugee problem as soon as possible."

4. Toward that end, a delegation from the BRRSG recently returned from a trip to New Delhi, where they met with the diplomatic missions of Canada, Austria, Switzerland and the Netherlands, seeking to enlist the assistance of those countries in finding a swift and equitable solution to the refugee crisis. They characterized their reception as very positive, and were encouraged by what they saw as the willingness of the international community to take a hand in resolving the situation. In Kathmandu, in addition to their meeting with Ambassador Malinowski and an earlier meeting with the British Ambassador, the group plans to meet with the Danish, Norwegian and German Embassies, and the resident EU representative. According to press reports, the team is urging governments with foreign assistance programs in Bhutan to withhold their aid if the Bhutanese government continues to delay a solution to the problem.

5. Comment: Efforts to find a resolution to the Bhutanese refugee crisis are welcome, especially when they are made by as distinguished and reasonable a group as the members of the BRRSG. From a humanitarian standpoint, the continued impasse on this issue is lamentable. More pragmatically, increasing impatience with the repatriation process, together with a lack of opportunities for employment and education, have created an environment in the camps conducive to homegrown radicalism, and ripe for recruitment by the Maoists. Bilateral efforts to resolve the problem have remained stalled for too long. This private initiative by the BRRSG, in which well-respected Nepalis are seeking to internationalize the issue and to engage the efforts of countries with foreign aid programs or other influence in Bhutan, is a positive new approach.

MALINOWSKI